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SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA

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TAGS: PREL PGOV PTER PINR UNSC LE SY

SUBJECT: LEBANON: HARIRI-NASRALLAH MEETING MEETS SAAD'S OBJECTIVES

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Nader Hariri, advisor to Saad Hariri, told Poloff and Senior Political LES October 29 that the meeting between March 14's leader, Saad Hariri, and Hizballah leader, Hassan Nasrallah, achieved Hariri's primary objective: to calm Sunni-Shia tensions. The October 26 meeting was, reportedly, a frank discussion about the significant events of the last two years, such as the July 2006 war and the May 2008 conflict, that polarized the Sunni and Shia communities. Both Saad and Nasrallah agreed to resolve future incidents under the authority of state institutions, such as the Internal Security Forces and the Lebanese Armed Forces. The joint statement released after the Hariri-Nasrallah meeting reflected an adherence to the principles of the Taif agreement from both sides. In addition, Saad publicly stated that he had no intention to abandon his March 14 allies in favor of an electoral alliance with Hizballah. The Hariri-Nasrallah meeting was preceded by a series of positive developments that created the proper environment for a meeting between the two leaders, Nader said. We will follow up directly with Saad Hariri in a scheduled October 30 meeting. End summary.

FRANK DISCUSSION BETWEEN
HARIRI AND NASRALLAH

¶2. (C) Nader Hariri, advisor to Saad Hariri, shared with Poloff and Senior Political LES October 29 that the October 26 Saad Hariri-Hassan Nasrallah meeting was not intended as "political reconciliation." Nader, who attended the meeting, said Saad achieved what he intended from the meeting: to calm Sunni-Shia tensions. Saad and Nasrallah had not met for 835 days; the last meeting occurred prior to the start of the July 2006 war. He said that Nasrallah welcomed Saad with hugs and kisses. (Note: In press photos, Saad appeared at ease and smiling. End note.)

¶3. (C) Nader characterized the meeting as a frank discussion about the previous period, notably the July 2006 war and the May 2008 events. Nasrallah told Saad Hizballah was displeased by March 14's statement issued after the 2006 war that painted Hizballah as an Iranian and Syrian proxy, Nader said. However, Saad rebutted by saying March 14's statement came only after Syrian President Bashar Asad and Iranian

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad claimed victory and referred to March 14 as an "Israel product," which confirmed Hizballah's position as proxy, Nader reported. During the meeting, Saad reconfirmed his commitment to March 14 and said he would not leave his allies in favor of an electoral alliance with Hizballah, while Nasrallah confirmed Hizballah would not leave its alliance with opposition Christian leader Michel Aoun.

¶14. (C) Saad also refused Nasrallah's offer to form a joint committee between the two parties to resolve any future incidents or disputes that may occur, according to Nader. Instead, Saad stressed -- and Nasrallah agreed -- to leave the resolution of incidents to the authority of state institutions, such as the Internal Security Forces (ISF) and the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). Nasrallah reportedly said that Hizballah had no desire to change the Lebanese constitution to reflect power-sharing based on a one-third formula for each of the Sunni, Shia, and Christian confessions. The joint statement released after the meeting stated that the Hariri and Hizballah would strengthen the work of the government and uphold the 1989 Taif agreement.

POSITIVE DEVELOPMENTS
PAVED THE WAY FOR THE MEETING

¶15. (C) Nader pointed to several positive developments in recent months that paved the way for the October 26 meeting. Specifically, he noted Saad's meeting with the Hizballah delegation that came to Qoreitem (the Hariri family

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residence) September 24; the removal of political banners from Beirut streets; the opening of the Muhammad al-Amine mosque; as well as the less provocative tone of the media as important factors.

¶16. (C) We interpret Nader's comments about the opening of the al-Amine mosque to mean Saad needed pan-Arab and Muslim recognition as a leader following what Saad perceived, as abandonment from his external friends after the May events. Their attendance at the mosque opening, in Saad's mind, improved his standing to meet with Nasrallah as an equal. We would also add Saad's July 17 trip to Iraq, specifically Najaf, as an event that raised his standing with Lebanese Muslims, generally, and with Lebanese Shia, in particular.

¶17. (C) In addition, throughout the month of Ramadan (September), many in Saad's political base were against the proposed meeting with Nasrallah and requested Saad provide them with weapons to fight against Hizballah. However, Saad took a leadership role, and convinced his base that taking up arms was not the legacy of his late father, Rafiq Hariri, Nader said.

¶18. (C) In preparation for the meeting, Saad told the Hizballah delegation that he was not seeking an apology from Hizballah for the May 7 events, Nader said. Saad reportedly told the Hizballah delegation, "the ballot box will show who was right," according to Nader. Furthermore, Nader said Saad did not want any harm to come to Nasrallah therefore Saad chose not to make the venue for the meeting a controversial issue. Nader did not reveal the site of the meeting.

¶19. (C) Nader confirmed that Saad briefed his March 14 allies, including Walid Jumblatt, Samir Geagea, Amine Gemayel, Boutros Harb, March 14 SYG Fares Souaid, Samir Franjieh and Ghattas Khoury on October 27 and 28. President Sleiman, Prime Minister Siniora, and Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri were also briefed.

SISON